

Review: Clearing the Air: The Health and Economic Damages of Air Pollution in China
Mun S. Ho and Chris P. Nielsen (Eds.)

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Clearing the Air represents the fruits of a Sino-American joint research project on the assessment of air pollution and its health and economic risks in China today. This project draws on the latest Chinese government surveys to examine the regional variations of pollutant emissions and concentrations, the health damages of human exposure to air pollution, and the economic evaluations of health impacts. The major strength of this work lies in its bottom-up approach that investigates the health risks of human exposure to air pollutants at the regional level. Data drawn from the sector-by-sector assessment of pollutant emissions and the cost-benefit analysis of various pollution control policies provide valuable guidance for national, regional, and local decision-making processes. The other strength of this work lies in its rich quantitative data. The extensive tables, figures, diagrams, and charts in each chapter and the appendices provide useful information for further study.

This book consists of ten chapters and is largely written for different audiences. The well-written introduction and the summaries of research findings in chapters 1 to 4 provide lay readers, non-specialists and students with a broader understanding of the subject matter. The highly specialized case studies from chapter 5 to chapter 10 and the quantitative data in the appendices appeal to environmental specialists, policy makers, and public health researchers.

Conceptually there are several findings worthy of attention. First, because of China's heavy dependence on coal for energy supply, a sector-by-sector analysis of pollutant emissions reveals that the electric power sector constitutes the largest source of health damages of air pollution in China, followed by the cement industry, motor vehicles, and so forth. This data enables the Chinese policy makers to prioritize and implement effective pollution control policies in order to deal with the specific sources of health damages. Second, the regional variations of pollutant emissions and concentrations are essential for an accurate benefit-cost analysis of pollution control. For example, a national policy that targets the electric power sector across the country may raise the price of electricity and cause hardships to the poor households in small townships and rural areas. Therefore, the policy makers need to gather more regional and local data of air pollution for developing environment protection policies beneficial to people in a specific area. Third, the social and economic benefits of pollution control are estimated to exceed the costs of public health damages, especially if the Chinese government can use the market mechanism to tackle the problem. One suggestion is to implement a green tax policy targeted at the major polluters. This proposal is believed to be capable of generating new revenues for the government in their efforts to resolve the regional and local sources of pollution.

In short, this book informs public policy debates and contributes to an interdisciplinary discussion of the problem of air pollution in China. It is timely and insightful, and should be of interest to scholars, journalists, policy makers, and students concerned about environment protection and public health issues in China today.

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